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RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE IMMEDIATE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000403

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: VIOLENT ARRESTS, POOR PRISON CONDITIONS, AND  
RIDICULOUS CHARGES

REF: A. MINSK 331

[1](#)B. MINSK 369

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Nearly three weeks have passed since the March 19 presidential election and the subsequent wave of arrests of street protesters. Detainees who were recently released have shared with independent press and Emboffs their accounts of violent arrests and meager prison conditions. They complained of beatings, overcrowded cells, little medical assistance, and little or no food for the first few days of detainment. Although many have now been released, other well-known activists, such as Zubr,s Nikita Sasim and Malady Front,s Dmitry Dashkevich, remain in jail on absurd charges. End Summary.

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Violent Arrests  
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Stories Circulate  
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[1](#)2. (C) As detainees are being released, pro-opposition news source Charter 97 continues to publish their personal accounts of arrest and prison conditions. They accuse the Special Forces and OMON riot police officers of violent behavior during arrests and transport to detention centers. Yuri Chavusav, a demonstrator arrested during the March 24 tent razing (Ref A) and sentenced to 10 days in jail, told Charter 97 that security officers repeatedly punched and kicked him in a bus and then choked him with his own scarf. Andrei Kuzmienkov, a 16-year-old arrested on March 25, suffered a ruptured kidney as a result of his beating, but was not released to a hospital until the following day. In an interview with independent newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda, Kuzmienkov said he was beaten for holding the national white-red-white flag during the demonstration.

[1](#)3. (C) Human rights lawyers from the NGO Vyasna Valentin Stephanovich and Ales Belyatsky told Ambassador on April 5 that they have enough evidence and plenty of witnesses to prove Special Forces and OMON riot police beat detainees on transport/arrest buses. The Vyasna lawyers noted prison guards and regular police officers were not involved in the beatings.

A First-Hand Account  
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[1](#)4. (C) Ales Yanukevich, the regional travel manager for 10

Coalition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich on April 5 told Poloff similar stories of abuse. Yanukevich was arrested on March 21 by Special Forces officers and escorted to a waiting detention bus. There the officers randomly punched him and other detainees. Yanukevich was wearing a type of body armor and did not feel much from the blows. However, when officers discovered Yanukevich was wearing armor, they punched him several times in the back of the head.

15. (C) Yanukevich observed many detainees who apparently had been beaten at the time of arrest or en route to the Okryestina detention center. According to Yanukevich, one sadistic Special Forces unit was responsible for beating many of the detainees. While in Okryestina, Yanukevich heard a story that this Special Forces unit arrested two brothers and beat them en route to Okryestina. The younger brother was so badly injured that the officers stopped the bus, pushed him out into the street, and drove away. Yanukevich later heard that the young man could not walk for a week and had not fully recovered.

#### Overcrowded Cells and Bad Food

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16. (C) Post has heard conflicting accounts about prison conditions, but all agree that prison norms in Belarus are lacking. Poloff on March 30 spoke to Vladimir Kishkurno, a Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) activist arrested following the elections. He claimed 15-25 people shared a stuffy 10-person cell with no ventilation. Inmates were lucky to use the restroom once a day, no blankets or pillows were provided, and most people had to sleep on the floor. The food included kasha (buckwheat porridge), bread, and tea of such poor quality that a normal person would not feed it to a pig.8 Prison guards were respectful. Many of the

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detainees were beaten, but the only medical assistance rendered was bandages and iodine.

17. (C) Deputy United Civic Party leader Ludmila Gryaznova on April 4 also complained to Poloff about the Special Forces, violent behavior at the time of arrest and in the detention center. She claimed officers regularly threatened to shoot the men and rape the women. Moreover, the Special Forces forced people to stand against a wall during their processing at Okryestina in the freezing cold at night until many lost consciousness. Disagreeing with Kishkurno's testimony, Gryaznova claimed inmates were feed well on a regular basis.

#### No Food For 24 Hours

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18. (C) Yanukevich told Poloff he shared a 6-person cell at Okryestina with 10 other men. After being arrested, he stood with his face to a wall most of the night until he was processed, but was not fed until after his conviction in court ) 24 hours later. He said the food was edible and delivered regularly, but it was the food parcels from his parents that helped him make it through his sentence. (Note: During the court cases on March 25, defendants repeatedly told Poloff and human rights lawyers that they had not been fed in 32 hours.)

#### OSCE To Further Investigate Prison Conditions

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19. (C) OSCE representative Fiona Frazer on April 4 agreed that lacking prison conditions during the first few days of mass arrests were probably due to the unexpected influx of detainees. However, though she allowed this was a reason, she did not consider it an excuse for not feeding detainees. Frazer said the OSCE determined Belarus, prison conditions fell below acceptable standards, especially for Europe, and intends to research the matter further.

## Contacts Made

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¶10. (C) Vyasna, Gryaznova, and Yanukevich informed Poloffs the imprisonment of the activists only served to further energize the detainees, spirit to fight. The detained used their 5 to 10-day sentences to establish contacts with new civil society activists, listen to different opinions, and come up with new ideas. Yanukevich said he used his time to educate others about the disappeared opposition activists and recruit members for his BPF party. All agreed that the mood of the detainees was more positive when they left Okryestina than when they arrived.

## Ongoing Concerns

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### Nikita Sasim

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¶11. (U) Although many detainees have been released, others remain in jail and face tougher sentences. On March 14, OMON riot police arrested Zubr activist Nikita Sasim and gave no reason. Sasim soon fell ill with appendicitis and was rushed to a hospital for night surgery. The next morning, the authorities, against the doctors' wishes, transported Sasim to the hospital in his hometown of Baranovichi. There he was strapped to his bed for a week and then moved to an isolation cell at the police station where he will remain until his trial for allegedly dodging the draft. (Note: On September 16, OMON officers beat Sasim after a demonstration, putting him in the hospital with a concussion. His head injuries allowed him to get a waiver from the draft.)

### Dead Protester

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¶12. (SBU) No one has been able to confirm the fate of a protester who the independent media claimed died from injuries resulting from the March 25 protest (ref B). Neither Vyasna, Milinkevich's team, the independent media, nor the OSCE has information confirming the missing protester is indeed named Sergei Otroshchenko. The GOB continues to claim that it has no hospital records for an Otroshchenko and denies that a protester died.

### Malady Front

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¶13. (C) Malady Front (MF) leader Dmitry Dashkevich has not been released from Okryestina and is to be charged, along with five MF colleagues, with running an unregistered organization that violates Belarusians' rights. Poloff on April 4 met with Dashkevich's lawyer Aleksandr Guliyev, who said the case against his client was a complete BKGB fabrication. According to Guliyev, Dashkevich will most likely be charged with a form of hooliganism that carries a sentence of up to two years in jail. Dashkevich refuses to acknowledge the charges against him and does not plan to testify in court, which will not begin until at least mid-May. Guliyev doubts Dashkevich will get anything less than the maximum possible sentence.

### Polish Ambassador Released

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¶14. (U) Authorities on April 7 discharged the former Polish Ambassador to Belarus Mariusz Maszkiewicz from a Minsk hospital and allowed to return to Poland. The diplomat was arrested on March 24 on October Square when security services razed the tent city. He was sentenced to 15 days in jail, but after serving five days, fell ill and was sent to a hospital for examinations and treatment.

## Two-Year Sentence for Graffiti

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¶15. (U) On April 7, Judge Esmann of the Minsk Central Court sentenced two Zubr activists Aleksandr Kazakov and Zmitser Zubro to two years of &khimia8 (suspended freedom and corrective labor) for insubordination to police officers. The two activists were arrested on December 28 for spray-painting circles with the number &168 in the center on buildings in Minsk. The number 16 was part of the Day of Solidarity campaign to support political prisoners. Kazakov and Zubro remain free as their lawyers appeal the verdict and sentence.  
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